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FSQS FACTS

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CHRONIC PROBLEM MEAT AND POULTRY PLANTS

Inspection for wholesomeness is required for all meat and poultry slaughtered and processed in the United States. Carrying out this inspection requirement is the responsibility of the U. S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Quality Service (FSQS).

Some 7,000 meat and poultry slaughtering and processing plants operate under FSQS inspection. Others operate under State inspection services equal to the Federal system.

Almost all of these 7,000 plants operate in a manner that fully meets inspection requirements. But a handful do not. They are identified by FSQS as "chronic problem plants" -- ones that consistently operate as close as possible to the minimum standards for product wholesomeness and labeling.

On March 22, 1978, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Carol Tucker Foreman announced a policy under which USDA will announce the names of officially identified "chronic problem plants."

Previously, USDA's only course of action in regard to "chronic problem plants" was to initiate proceedings to withdraw inspection services -- to, in effect, close plants down. The procedures required to complete this process are lengthy and cumbersome. USDA is seeking legislation to speed up the inspection withdrawal process. Meanwhile the new policy will serve to notify the public of the standards in these "chronic problem plants."

Under the new policy, the designation of "chronic problem plants" will be based on information from plant reviews conducted by FSQS review officers under the Inplant Compliance (IPC) Program.

Program Records to be Used

Under the IPC Program, Federal review officers systematically review, record, and analyze operations of official meat and poultry plants to measure at the plant level the overall effectiveness of the Federal meat and poultry inspection program. These IPC reviews supplement the daily reviews of the inspection staff and identify key deficiencies that may affect the wholesomeness and truthful labeling of the inspected product.

The IPC Group reviews federally inspected plants in a random sampling-type operation and employs a numerical system to rate plants according to the significance of deficiencies found during reviews. A plant may be assigned to the following categories:

Category 4 -- if no significant deficiencies are observed;

Category 3 -- if only minor deficiencies are found; and

Category 2 or 1 -- if serious deficiencies exist.

Once a plant has been initially reviewed, it is scheduled for followup reviews at intervals determined by the previous rating. Plants needing more attention are rated numerically low and are reviewed at shorter intervals than better-rated plants that require less attention.

The procedures for inplant compliance reviews, including the basis for the categories and ratings, are contained in MPI Directive 921.2. Any one interested in this technical information may request a copy from Administrative Services Division, FSQS, USDA, Room 0157, South Building, Washington, DC 20250.

The New Policy

The Department will use the records of reviews made under the IPC Program as a starting point for the new policy. How a plant rates in a series of consecutive reviews will determine whether it will be designated as a "problem" or "chronic problem" plant.

A plant will be designated as "problem plant" when in two consecutive reviews it is rated in Category 1 -- that is, a category sequence of 1-1 -- or a category sequence of 2-1; or when in three consecutive reviews, it has a category sequence of 1-2-2 or 2-2-2. When a plant is designated as a "problem plant," the plant manager will receive written notice of such designation and a follow-up review will be scheduled within 6 months. This provides the manager with ample time to correct deficiencies noted during the review.

A plant is removed from the "problem plant" category only when in the next two reviews -- at 6-month intervals -- its numerical rating is 3 or 4 -- that is, it has no or only minor deficiencies.

If, on the other hand, a "problem plant" is rated in Category 1 or 2 on either of its next two reviews, it will be designated as a "chronic problem plant." The name of the designated "chronic problem plant" will be publicized without further notification.

A plant will retain the "chronic problem plant" designation until two successive followup reviews -- spaced 6 months apart -- show improved conditions, demonstrated by either Category 3 or 4 ratings. A public announcement will be made upon removal of a plant from the "chronic problem plant" list.

Although a followup review normally would be conducted 6 months after a plant is designated as a "chronic problem plant," the first followup review may be conducted ahead of schedule, if requested. Should the plant demonstrate improved conditions -- that is, rated in Category 3 or 4 -- at the first followup review, a public announcement concerning the plant's progress will be issued at that time.

Announcement of the new policy was published in the March 17 Federal Register. As of that date, "chronic problem plants" are to be announced to the public via press releases as they are identified.

